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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the development and implementation of a library instruction unit for use in a basic reading and study skills course for freshmen at Trenton State College in New Jersey. A brief discussion of reasons for the lack of library skills among these students is followed by a list of course objectives. It is noted that at the completion of the library instruction program, students would: (1) be able to understand and follow basic library procedures for using the card catalog, locating a book by call number, and checking out books; (2) have become acquainted with library staff members and understand when and how to ask questions; (3) be able to understand the purpose and organization of 30 basic reference sources; and (4) be able to operate library copy machines and microfilm viewers and printers. The procedures used to accomplish each objective are described, with sample check lists provided which cover methods for obtaining information from a librarian and methods for evaluating reference sources. The basic reference materials included in the library instruction unit are also noted. The paper concludes with a list of three references. (ESR)

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# BASIC SKILLS IN THE COLLEGE LIBRARY: PEOPLE, BOOKS, AND MACHINES

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# BASIC SKILLS IN THE COLLEGE LIBRARY: PEOPLE, BOOKS, AND MACHINES

Every September, small groups of freshman can be found clutching their orientation handbooks as they are led through a tour of the college library. Proceeding from the circulation desk to the card catalog, they learn about procedures for locating and checking out books. Moving on through the reference room and the periodicals collection, these students begin to realize what a vast amount of information the library contains. Government documents, rare book collections, computers, and microforms with viewers and printers add a sophistication to the college library which these freshman never found in their high school libraries. Finally, as the group of students wanders through the stacks, they are likely to feel overwhelmed and somewhat confused by the variety and complexity of the college library.

This confusion is multiplied many times over for students enrolled in basic skills courses. We found that students in a basic reading and study skills course did not know how to use the card catalog, and could not explain the difference between a reference book and a work of fiction. While we were not surprised to find most students inexperienced in using a microform viewer, we were shocked to learn that some students had never used a copy machine. They were reluctant to ask for help in the library because they were afraid they might appear "stupid." Clearly, these remedial students lacked preparation in the most basic library skills which are essential to survival in college.

Why were these students so inexperienced in using the library? Possibly their high school curriculum did not emphasize instructional programs in library skills. Indeed, many classroom teachers do not see library instruction as their

responsibility. Silverman, Ream, and Brodi (1981) report that many high school teachers assume that students already know how to use the library; furthermore, they avoid giving assignments which require use of the library.

Perhaps the remedial learners themselves have contributed to the problem. These students characteristically exhibit a lack of confidence and self-motivation. To avoid the frustration and embarrassment of "being lost" in the library, these reluctant learners often stay away from the library "where all the brains are." If they do attempt to use the library, they may rely upon their limited knowledge and after a few unsuccessful attempts, give up in frustration.

The complexity of the college library compounds the problem faced by the basic skills student. The size, the classification system, and the aura of seriousness in the academic library can easily intimidate the student who is struggling to understand the floor plan of the building.

For these students, the orientation tour of the library was just not enough. They required instruction in fundamental library skills as well as structured activities which would force them to go to the library and use the resources available to them. As part of the study skills program, we included a unit which would supplement the library orientation and give basic skills students practical experience in using the library.

With the help of the college librarian and an assessment of the needs of the students, we decided upon four objectives. By the end of this unit, our basic skills students would:

-- Understand and follow basic library procedures, including: using the card catalog, locating a book by using its call number, and checking out a book at the circulation desk

-- Be acquainted with members of the library staff and understand how and when to ask questions

-- Understand the purpose and organization of thirty basic reference sources

-- Be able to operate the copy machine, microfilm viewer, and microfilm printer.

College Library

Because the most common terms and procedures were unclear to our students, these became our starting point. Using the college library manual developed by DuBois (1981), students learned library terminology, including: card catalog, circulation desk, call number, classification system, and stacks. They also became aware of general operations, borrowing procedures, and the many services the library will provide to help students acquire necessary sources of information.

To reinforce this, an assistant librarian met with the students. He reviewed library procedures, and explained the Library of Congress classification system. Especially helpful was a demonstration of how to use the card catalog and how to check out a book.

As a follow-up activity, each student was required to locate an assigned book in the card catalog, note its call number, find the book in the stacks, and check the book out at the circulation desk. While these activities are commonplace for most college students, this lesson was essential to the remedial learners. This experience gave the students confidence and helped them overcome a real obstacle to locating information in the library.

Additionally, since the card catalog is frequently used in preliminary research, we taught our students how to develop a working bibliography. Each student learned the correct format for a bibliography and compiled a list of ten books which might form the basis of a future project.

People

Throughout this unit, our goal was to encourage the students to recognize the helpfulness of the library staff. Still, the one word most associated with the library, "Shhh!," deters even the boldest student. Because these basic skills students are especially reluctant to pose questions, we wanted some guarantee that they would actually use the help available to them.

Following guidelines suggested by the librarian, each student developed a question which was to be answered by the librarian. (See figure 1.) Questions pertained to reference materials, research techniques, or actual assignments. Careful planning went into the formation of each question which was written on a 3 x 5 index card and evaluated for purpose and clarity (Katz, 1979). The students asked their questions individually as an out of class assignment. At the next class meeting, students read their questions aloud and summarized the librarian's response.

One student who had timidly inquired about a book which would discuss the historical events of 1585 A.D. was amazed to locate his book and also to find that there were books which went back thousands of years before 1585. He was also relieved to find that what he had thought was a "stupid" question was not so stupid after all.

Figure I

## How to Ask a Question in the Library

**PROBLEM: What information do you need to know?**

**Who could best answer your question?**

circulation desk_____
information desk_____
reference librarian_____

**How can you help the librarian to answer your question?**

Why do you need to know this information?

Is this an assignment for class? If so, bring along the assignment sheet.

Who is the teacher who gave the assignment? Tell the librarian.

When do you need the information?

When is the assignment due?

If you are looking for information from a specific type of source, such as a periodical or reference book, be sure to mention this.

**Write the question which you will ask the librarian:**

**Look at the question and consider:**

Is the question clear and understandable?

Have you used specific and exact words?

How do you expect the librarian to answer your question?

a) yes/no_____
b) give directions_____
c) lead you to a book_____
d) give specific factual information_____
e) lead you to further research_____
f) other_____(explain)

**Ask your question in the library.**

**Summarize the answer.**
**How did the Librarian react to your question?**
**Were you satisfied with the answer/information you received?**

Books

College students must use the library to locate information for reports, speeches, term papers, and current events projects. The logical starting point for this research is the reference room, yet many people are more confused here than in any part of the library. To eliminate this confusion, we taught our students the purpose of reference books, the organization of the reference room, and the location of general reference works. We also gave a detailed explanation of the use of the Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature. Class lectures focused on terminology essential to the use of reference material, including: bibliography, standard reference source, cumulative reference source, index, entry, and abstract.

The students were involved in several activities designed to give them experience in the reference room. Using the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, students located magazine and journal articles on selected topics. Especially interesting to the students was a research hunt which required the use of reference works to answer "trivia" questions.

The most helpful activity was the evaluation of reference books. Each student was assigned one general and one specific reference work. These included:

General Reference Works-

Encyclopedia Americana
Webster's Third International Dictionary
Hammond's Ambassador Atlas
Facts on File
Information Please Almanac, Atlas, Yearbook
Current Biography
Book Review Digest
Chase's Calendar of Annual Events
American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language
New Columbia Encyclopedia
Statistical Abstract of the U.S.
Statesman's Yearbook
Bartlett's Familiar Questions
Public Affairs Information Service
Books in Print and Subject Guide to Books in Print

and Specific Reference Materials:

Oxford Companion to the Theatre
Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians
Encyclopedia of World Art
Graujer's Index to Poetry
Reader's Encyclopedia
Oxford Companion to Classical Literature
Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology
Encyclopedia of Social Sciences
An Encyclopedia of Religion
McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of Science and Technology
Reader's Guide to the Social Sciences
Cyclopedia of Education
Webster's Geographical Dictionary
Encyclopedia of World History
Dictionary of Economics and Business

Using the guidelines for evaluating a reference source, (See Figure 2), each student considered the purpose, organization, usefulness, and limitations of two assigned reference sources. In brief oral presentations, students explained to their classmates the location of the reference books, the results of their evaluations, and procedures which would help students use the reference sources. This activity enabled the students to become acquainted with thirty reference sources and provided them with the skill of evaluating any reference book which they may consider for future research projects.

MACHINES

Our fourth objective involved the use of machines in the library. We began with the copy machine. Without this indispensable skill, some students admitted they had actually torn pages out of books and magazines or stolen materials from the library. A simple demonstration of the use of the machine followed by student participation helped overcome this very basic problem for both students and librarians.

For instruction on microforms, the class assembled in the microprint room of the library. They learned about reel microfilm, microfiche, ultrafiche, and micro-opaque cards as well as the machines for reading and printing these mater-

ials. While the students learned about all the microforms, they were required to use only the reader and printer for reel microfilm.

Using the index in the newspaper archives, students located a microfilm of the edition of the New York Times published on the day they were born. After watching a demonstration of the correct use of the microfilm viewer, each student threaded the viewer, found the front page of the New York Times, and, using the printer, secured a copy of "all the news that was fit to print" on the day of his or her birth. The students skimmed the rest of the newspaper to find out about the fashions, weather, and problems of the world which they had entered. They wrote brief summaries of the news of the day which they shared during a class discussion.

By the end of the unit, our students knew how to use the people, books, and machines in the college library to their best advantage. Throughout the semester we continued to give assignments which would send our students to the library. Students researched controversial topics and used the data they had found to support their positions in class debates. They read chapters from books placed on reserve, developed bibliographies, made copies of articles, and viewed assigned microfilm reels. Through these practical experiences, our students gained knowledge and confidence in using the college library which a general tour of the library could never provide. And, they had developed skills which would help them throughout their college careers.

## Figure 2

## Evaluation of a Reference Source

I. Look at the title page and answer the following questions:

What is the title? _____

What is the subtitle? _____

Who is the author or editor? _____

What edition is this? _____

Who is the publisher? _____

Where was this book published? _____

What is the copywight date? _____

II. Read the preface or introduction of your book and answer the following:

What is the purpose of this book? _____

For whom is this book intended? _____

If the author gives any information which will help the user of this book, briefly summarize it. _____

III. Read the table of contents of your reference source.

List some of the major headings.

Does the table of contents list a glossary, index, or appendix? If so, what information will you find in these? _____

IV. After you have looked through the preliminary pages of the reference source, answer the following:

Is this a standard reference source?

Is this a cumulative reference source?

If there are supplements, how often are they published?

Are their abbreviations used in this reference source?

If so, is there a key to help the reader?

Where is the key to the abbreviations located?

Give one example of an abbreviation and its explanation.

Does this reference source contain special instructions which explain how to use this book? If so, summarize these directions.

V. Page through your book and read three or four entries.

What kind of information is included? Give specific examples.

How is the information organized and presented?

Are there any special illustrations or graphics included in this book? If so, describe one or two which you find interesting.

Evaluation of a Reference Source (continued)

VI. Is this book easy to understand?

Does the user of this book need any special knowledge or skills. Explain.

VII. How can this reference book be helpful to college students? Give at least three specific examples.

VIII. Write five questions which can be answered by using this reference source.

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